

Transforming Defense in an Era of Peace and Prosperity

**Compiled by
Dr. Conrad C. Crane
Strategic Studies Institute**

From April 17-20, 2001, the U.S. Army War College sponsored a major conference to examine the many issues and questions surrounding the transformation of the U.S. Armed Forces from a Cold War paradigm into a defense establishment ready to meet the complex challenges of the future. The conference brought together at Carlisle Barracks over 230 American and foreign academic, business, government, media, and military representatives. A series of enlightening—and sometimes troubling—discussions highlighted the many opportunities and challenges involved in executing long-term and extensive defense reform. The conference focused on five general themes: an historical overview of defense transformations, change and organizational dynamics, global perspectives on American defense reform, financing the process, and Service plans to execute it. This brief summary highlights some of the most important issues and concerns that arose during the conference. The outstanding work done by all who participated will be reflected in a comprehensive anthology that will be published by the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute later this year.

Historical Overview.

Many senior defense leaders, particularly those in uniform, fight fervently to preserve the capability of the Armed Forces to fight major theater wars, citing American unpreparedness for World War II and Korea. Their focus may be on a distant future that contains a near-peer competitor or may simply be on being ready for an unforeseen requirement to fight a large-scale conventional conflict. Most panelists, though, were convinced that the military needs to turn away from the "2MTW" standard and reorient the force on the diverse missions and deployments seen during the 1990s. They also cited historical precedents, such as the period between the World Wars, when American military forces were used primarily for operations other than war. That example is far closer to the historical norm for use of the Armed Services in peacetime and probably more accurate in predicting what the near future will entail. Whatever path defense transformation takes, it must reconcile elements of both these divergent views. The result must be a full-spectrum force that is not so tailored for the likely smaller-scale contingencies that it can't undertake a major theater war or two without undue risk. Conversely, it must not be so focused on warfighting that it lacks utility for the diverse missions that American policymakers will assign it.

History also suggests that attempts at broad defense reform have been very difficult to sustain without broad public and political support. For the Army, at least, this backing was most easily obtained when a clear threat to the homeland needed to be countered.

Although homeland security is receiving increased scrutiny of late, the public appears blissfully ignorant of the threat and disinterested in security issues, leaving support for defense transformation in question. Absent that clear threat, the Bush administration will probably be guided—in the use of military force and in transformation—by a combination of the so-called Powell and Clinton doctrines, trying to prioritize contingencies by interests, but also realizing the many demands of globalization.

Change and Organizational Dynamics.

Admiral (retired) William Owens opened the conference by offering his views regarding institutional impediments to defense transformation. He described an establishment held back by Service parochialism and failing to exploit the potential of information-age technology. He pleaded for increased jointness and visionary leadership, themes echoed by a number of speakers throughout the conference.

Large organizations inherently resist change, and the Department of Defense is no exception. The process of reforming it must begin with a new strategic orientation, producing new methods and concepts to guide transformation. The costs of getting things wrong can be disastrous for the nation, and this is another contributor to the usually cautious and step-by-step pace of change in military systems. To overcome a risk-averse organizational culture, the Armed Services must find or create internal agents for change, and then publicly encourage and reward them. Otherwise innovation will continue to be stifled, and any current external support for transformation will be wasted.

Global Perspectives on Defense Transformation.

America's allies and other friends support the drive to create more lethal and deployable U.S. forces and expect to learn a great deal from observing that transformation process. However, they are concerned about the pace and degree of change and see many difficulties with future interoperability. They also worry that reformers are focused too much on technology, especially stand-off weaponry, and are too optimistic about how soon advanced capabilities will be available. In the process, human factors and the continued need for decisive close combat capability are being neglected.

Interoperability is also a concern of other U.S. government agencies, although they generally support defense transformation. They argue for accompanying changes to the rest of the national security apparatus, particularly the Department of State. Defense specialists support this broader transformation, but warn that it must not come at the expense of Department of Defense needs.

Transformation will be made even more problematic by the lack of public interest and knowledge. The American people expect their Military Services to be capable of performing full-spectrum operations while simultaneously adapting to future demands. Generally, though, the public does not understand the scope of transformation and has relatively little interest in foreign affairs. The public and its leaders' decreasing level of military experience will increase communication difficulties and magnify the importance

of military leaders maintaining their credibility. Because of this growing civil-military gap, a number of speakers expressed skepticism that the Armed Services, and especially the Army, will be able to recruit and retain the right personnel to man these transformed forces.

Financing the Process.

Another subject that inspired pessimistic assessments involved finding the funding to support a thorough and extended defense transformation. Economizing doesn't appear to be the answer: cuts in force structure have not produced expected savings, while attempts to reduce infrastructure have run into political opposition. The Services so far continue to fund current operations from sustainment funds, though a change in national security strategy might place less demands upon them. As the situation currently stands, the administration cannot pursue transformation, legacy systems maintenance, quality-of-life improvement initiatives and national missile defense without major infusions into the defense budget. Some argue that these problems can be solved by increasing defense spending to 4 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, but there is little support for such an increase. Others point out that with our large trade deficit, low savings rate, big foreign debt, and the imminent mass retirement of the "baby boom" generation, even current military budget levels are too high and require a reduction. At least one panelist said that between 2 and 2.5 percent was closer to the international norm, though the reason the rest of the world is able to spend so much less than the United States is because of the heavy defense burden the United States bears. Most commentators expect funding to increase only slightly, which may foretell a smaller future force. To remain effective and meet national security strategy requirements, that force will need even more the increased capabilities resulting from transformation.

Service Approaches to Transformation.

The Air Force and Navy described their processes for change as more a product of habitual innovation than revolutionary transformation. The Air Force's plans are based almost exclusively on exploiting new technologies to magnify rapid precision engagement capability. The Navy will continue to project power and maintain command of the seas while perfecting new methods of network-centric warfare. The Marine Corps openly admits its own transformation will be evolutionary and not revolutionary, adding speed, precision, and stealth to its proven expeditionary capabilities.

The Army has the most comprehensive and ambitious program for change of all the Services. It plans to provide a set of new and enhanced options for the National Command Authority by improving technology, personnel, doctrine, organizational structures, and training, while still maintaining readiness for current contingencies. The new force will be more deployable and more lethal, capable of winning more quickly and thereby reducing casualties and infrastructure damage. Like most programs intending to exploit the potential of a Revolution in Military Affairs, the new Army will depend

heavily on command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) to overmatch its opponents on every part of the battlefield. The Service concedes that its biggest challenge will be changing organizational culture, but sees transformation as an essential requirement to meet future national security needs.

It was apparent from the Service presentations that there is at best a limited joint approach to transformation. With conflicting visions and constrained budgets, some hard choices will have to be made, and certainly no Service will get everything it wants. That will make the proper selections of new technology and directions even more critical, to make sure the right programs survive to meet the demands of a violent future.

Conclusions.

A great cloud of uncertainty hung over the conference about the approach that the Bush administration would take concerning national strategy and military transformation. There are many indications that the president and his advisers are aware of the need for defense reform, but their concepts may differ greatly from those of the Service chiefs, who have not been major players in the conduct of Secretary Rumsfeld's initial reviews.

The most difficult hurdles to overcome to enable successful defense transformation are cultural, both within the military and American society. Organizational innovation must be fostered and encouraged, and the Services must create an environment that encourages and accepts experimentation, to include attendant costs and risks. Yet this by itself will be a wasted effort if the public and Congress do not understand and support the transformation process. Visionary military leaders will have to educate and inspire many outside their Service as well as those serving within it.

Though conference attendees had many differing opinions about the barriers to defense transformation and how to overcome them, a broad consensus formed that some change is essential to meet future security requirements. It is ironic that the peace which creates the prosperity and wealth to fund transformation and permits a window of time to achieve it, also decreases public interest and urgency to accomplish it. If the opportunity is squandered, or the wrong choices are made, the costs to the nation could be catastrophic.

* * * * *

The views expressed in this conference brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This conference brief is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

* * * * *